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AUTHOR Hughes, Arthur
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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen the decline in popularity of contrastive analysis (CA) and the rise of error analysis (EA) as a method for explaining and predicting errors in second language learning. In CA, it is felt that by comparing the structure of a first language (L1) to that of one being learned (L2), errors can be predicted. These errors are caused by "interference," the negative transfer of habits from L1 to L2. CA has been disappointing in its prediction of errors because it has underestimated the contribution of the learner, has not recognized fully the nature of what is to be learned, and has not taken into account the method of presentation of L2. EA looks at the errors made in L2, and claims the identification, description, and explanation of these errors will lead to a better understanding of the language learning process. Problems with CA include the lack of appropriate description, difficulties in making comparisons, and the absence of an effective measure of difference between L1 and L2. Inadequacies of EA in description and explanation of errors are due to misconceptions about the learning process. But EA, unlike CA, does take into account the learner and the manner of presentation. (PJM)

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Arthur Hughes
Department of Linguistic Science
University of Reading
England

Problems in Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis[1]

Contrastive analysis (CA) involves comparison, prediction and explanation. The structures of the language of the learner (L_1) are compared with those of the language which he attempts to learn (L_2). On the basis of this comparison, predictions are made of difficulties which the learner will experience in learning the L_2.[2] And by reference to this comparison, many of the errors made by the learner in speaking, writing, listening to or reading the L_2 will be explained. It was the confident expectation of the pioneers in this field that such analyses would result in 'the preparation of better textbooks, tests, articles and experiments, and contribute to the general improvement of the teaching and testing of foreign languages' (Lado, 1957).

Error analysis (EA) involves the identification, description, and explanation of the errors which the learner makes in the L_2. It is anticipated that the study of learners' errors will lead to a better understanding of the processes by which languages are learned, and that this in turn will lead to the development of improved teaching methods, materials, syllabuses etc. At a more mundane level, EA is seen as an activity akin to diagnostic testing, a means of ascertaining the extent of a learner's (or group of learners') control of various features of the L_2.

CA and EA have in common the function of explaining learners' errors. What they do not have in common is current popularity. While interest in CA has declined markedly since its heyday in the 1960's, enthusiasm for EA has steadily mounted over the last ten years. What I should like to do in this paper is first to examine the reasons for CA's loss of popularity, and then to turn to EA to see whether that too is likely to suffer a similar fate. Since what I say must serve for some members of the audience as an introduction to CA and EA, and because time is limited, I must simplify more than I should like, not developing points which would benefit from expansion, and failing to draw attention to possible objections to some of the claims that I shall make. I shall try nevertheless to give as fair a picture of these two fields of study as I am able, though I realise that to some eyes my characterisation may at times take on the appearance more of caricature.[3]

It was claimed by Lado (1957) 'that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture'. When a Frenchman says in English, "I wait the bus since twenty minutes", we recognise the phenomenon to which Lado is referring. The Frenchman's utterance is a word for word translation of the French equivalent of what he wanted to say in English. The Frenchman, Lado would argue, has developed since childhood a set of (French) language habits which are extremely strong and which will tend to be transferred when he speaks English.[4] Where there are differences between equivalent French and English structures, the transfer of habits will have an adverse, negative effect on the development of a new, English set of habits. On this view, learning a second language is largely a matter of overcoming the effects of negative transfer (or 'interference', as it is otherwise known). 'The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special 'set' created by the first language habits' (Fries, 1957). This is where, it is claimed, the real difficulty of second language learning lies. The assumption is made (Lado, 1957) that for the learner 'those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements which are different will be difficult.' The systematic comparison of L_1 structures with their L_2 equivalents will bring to light differences and so indicate those features of the L_2 which will prove difficult for the learner, this information bringing all the benefits to language teaching mentioned above. In 1957 Lado said 'It will soon be considered quite out of date to begin writing a textbook without having previously compared the two systems.' In the twelve or so years following this assertion, many contrastive materials and articles concerned with CA were indeed published. Today, by contrast, there are relatively few, and I think that it is not unfair to say that interest in the subject is much diminished. I shall now try to explain why this change has taken place.

The most important reason for the loss of popularity of CA has been, I believe, the disappointment felt at its lack of success in predicting difficulties. Some disappointment was unwarranted; CA never claimed to predict all difficulties. But, as we have seen above, it did claim to identify 'the basic problems'. What contrastive analyses have in fact tended to do is predict difficulties already known to the analyst, and so generally known also to the teachers and textbook writers who were supposed to benefit from them. If the claim to predict

difficulties is considered as a scientific hypothesis (see Wardhaugh 1972), then the kinds of analyses that I have just mentioned can hardly be thought of as a means of testing it. Where, on the other hand, controlled experiments have been conducted, either in the laboratory (Brière 1966) or in a school setting (Whitman and Jackson 1972), the CA hypothesis has tended to be falsified. Indeed, one of the Japanese-English analyses which Whitman and Jackson tested predicted levels of difficulty which correlated negatively with actual levels of difficulty as measured by performance on a language test, i.e. what was predicted to be easier was in fact harder, and vice versa. The next question to which we must address ourselves, then, is why CA is unsuccessful in predicting difficulty.

In any learning situation we can distinguish three main elements: the learner, what has to be learned, and the way in which what has to be learned is presented to the learner. CA, I would argue, has undervalued the contribution of the learner, has failed to recognise fully the nature of what has to be learned (the L_2), and has not taken into account the way the L_2 is presented to the learner. Of course we will not say that CA is deficient because it does not take full account of every element in the learning situation; but we may believe that in this lies at least part of the reason for its failure to make accurate predictions of difficulty.

As CA assumes, the learner does transfer elements from the L_1, and much of this is habit-like. The Frenchman, referred to above, who says, "I wait the bus since twenty minutes", may correct himself immediately without prompting, adding "I know what it should be, but if I'm not concentrating .....". A Spanish woman whose learning of English only through conversation with me over six months (86 hours contact) I tape-recorded completely (Hughes 1979), used correct English adjective-noun order from the very start, without a single error; yet when this pattern seemed well established, she suddenly produced the form 'sweater red', reflecting the word order dominant in Spanish. The assertion of Newmark and Reibel (1968) that the problem of interference reduces to one of ignorance, that the learner only uses L_1 forms because he is still ignorant of the appropriate L_2 forms, does not hold up. But what is undoubtedly true is their claim that the learner is more than the place where competing linguistic systems take potshots at each other. He brings more to the learning situation than a set of L_1 habits. He is an active participant, selecting - consciously or unconsciously - those elements in the L_2 which are most useful to him, often concentrating on content words to the exclusion of grammatical signals which convey

little information; so, "Bill coming today". He recognises, consciously or unconsciously, patterns in the L_2, which he incorporates into his own version of that language, his failure to observe the limits of these patterns leading to errors (e.g. "I eated") which provide us with evidence of this ability to recognise patterns. It may even happen that the learner, through following what he preceives as an L_2 pattern, makes errors which he would have avoided had he followed the pattern of the L_1 - hardly what CA would predict! That errors of this kind occur has been known for a long time (see French 1941), but it is only with the advent of error analysis, under the influence of first language acquisition studies that view the child as a 're-creator' of his language, that they have received much attention. I will not pursue this matter further at this stage, but merely point out that the 'strategies' that the learner employs in learning the L_2 will influence the errors that he makes and the difficulties that he experiences.

I said that CA does not take into account the way in which the L_2 is presented to the learner. I have in mind here more than is usually understood by the term 'presentation'. I am thinking not only of the method used, but also of the order of presentation, the form and amount of practice - in fact the sum total of the learner's experience of the L_2. Taking just one of these factors, order of presentation, it is obvious, I think, that this will affect the ease or difficulty of particular language structures. To take a simple example, one with which teachers and textbook writers are very familiar, the auxiliary verb do is used in English in both negation and interrogation (as well as in other operations). The learning of one operation, let us say negation, will surely have an effect, presumably beneficial, on the learning of the other, and so each operation will be more or less difficult to learn according to the order in which it is presented. It requires little imagination to recognise what considerable effects variations in presentation will have on the ease or difficulty of learning various L_2 structures. CA cannot predict these effects; nor can it predict the effects of learners' strategies. To say this is not to criticise CA. CA, like any science, can make predictions 'other things being equal'. But in the case of CA these 'other things' are themselves such powerful factors that the transfer effects with which CA is concerned will be lost in their 'noise'; the predicted difficulties will not be apparent. As a result of this, proponents of CA are obliged to speak in terms of the prediction of potential, rather than actual, difficulties and errors.

Having looked at what are essentially problems in the validation of CA, I want to turn not to what I see as problems in the analysis itself. If we treat the claims of CA as a scientific hypothesis, then we should expect to find associated with it an explicit and mechanical procedure whereby, at least in principle, comparisons and predictions can be made by someone quite unfamiliar with the two languages and the kinds of learning difficulties experienced, and without any dependence on intuition. There is in fact no such procedure, and we are not in a position to formulate one. CA is necessarily piecemeal and intuitive. Even if the transfer effects were not hidden by the other factors discussed above, I think that it is doubtful whether CA would make predictions with anything like the accuracy that has been claimed for it. I see four main reasons for this:

(1) We do not have the descriptions of the languages that we need. If, as is argued below, the relatedness of structures is very important to CA, then these descriptions must be both detailed and complete. Not only do we not have such descriptions, it is questionable whether we should know how to write them. The experiment of Brière (1966) showed that, at least at the level of pronunciation, the relevant parameters for predicting difficulty were not always ones which would be included in a purely linguistic description. What we require are grammars whose elements and structure in some sense have psychological reality both for the learner and for the native speaker, who will have to interpret what the learner says. The writing of such grammars in our present state of knowledge is quite inconceivable.

(2) If we had the right descriptions, it is not obvious what we should compare with what. At the grammatical level, Lado suggests that we compare forms having the same grammatical meaning, giving as an example YES-NO questions in English and Spanish. YES-NO interrogation in Spanish is effected simply by intonation. In English it is realised by the inversion of the subject and the first auxiliary verb. Where no auxiliary verb is present, do is inserted. On the basis of this, difficulties are to be predicted. What this does not take account of is the fact that in English negation not is placed after the first auxiliary verb, and do is again inserted when no auxiliary is present. In describing negation and YES-NO interrogation (and indeed other structures; see Palmer 1974), reference must be made in both cases to the first auxiliary verb and to do insertion. While we would not wish to argue that all the patterns that we can distinguish in a language are the ones that the learner will recognise, it is surely the case that the

fact that interrogation and negation have the above features in common will affect the learning of these structures. But I do not see how CA, in making comparisons, can take full account of the relatedness of structures which do not have the same grammatical meaning. To the degree that a language can be seen as a system of systems, we should have to compare two whole language systems in order to predict the difficulties to be encountered in learning one element of one subsystem. While a comparison of two complete phonological systems may be possible (and it is not insignificant that the title of a recent article (Scovel, (1976) is 'Contrastive analysis is alive and well and living somewhere in phonology'), the comparison of whole languages in order to identify particular points of difficulty is hardly a practical enterprise.

(3) A further problem for CA is the lack of any satisfactory objective measure of similarity or difference. In interference studies in the field of verbal learning, where, for example, the effect of the learning of one list of paired nonsense syllables on the learning of another such list is examined, objective measures have been developed. But these measures would not be at all appropriate in the case of differences between grammatical structures. Yet, if we want to predict how difficult various structures are, we do need some measure. In relating difference to difficulty, Lado (1957) suggests that differences between 'media' (e.g. between word order and inflection) in the realisation of a particular grammatical meaning entail greater difficulty for the learner than do differences within media (e.g. between two different word orders). This dichotomy is hardly a satisfactory measure.

(4) If we did have a satisfactory measure of difference, it is not at all clear how we would predict degrees of difficulty with any accuracy. It might be thought that the greater the difference, the greater will be the difficulty. This seems most unlikely. For one thing, as we have seen each language element is part of a larger system, and ease of learning one element will depend in part on the learning of other elements in the system. But even if we felt we could compare elements in isolation, there remains the problem of comparative complexity. If we compared subject-verb agreement in English and French, then presumably, logically, we would have to say that the English and French systems were equally different from each other. It would follow from the principle that degree of difficulty is directly and positively related to difference that the French system was just as easy for a native speaker of English to learn as the English system is for a native speaker of French. I would suggest that this is not the case. The French system is more complex and of itself more difficult to learn.[5] Contrastive analysts are not unaware

of this problem, but until we have a reliable, objective measure of complexity, and degree of complexity is taken into account in predicting difficulty, then these predictions will be inaccurate.

Even when two systems of more or less equal complexity are compared, it is not obvious that greater similarity means easier learning. The verb inflection systems of Spanish and Italian are very similar, and so, for example, the speaker of Spanish should find the learning of this part of Italian simple by comparison, say, with an English speaker. Yet, because of this similarity, the Spanish speaker may go on making mistakes in this area - using Spanish forms - after an English speaker has mastered it. While our response to this will depend to some degree on what we think to be the proper measure of difficulty (in the earliest stages the Spanish speaker probably would be more successful than the English speaker), results from verbal learning experiments show that even in nonsense syllable learning, difference and difficulty are not related in a straightforward fashion. In such experiments, accurate prediction depends upon the similarity and difference of both stimuli and responses (Osgood 1949). Even if contrastive analysts were ready to make use of findings in verbal learning experiments, it is not clear how they could be applied in their work, how, for instance, stimuli and responses could be unambiguously identified.

I have pointed out what I believe to be four problems in carrying out contrastive analysis: the lack of appropriate descriptions; difficulties in making comparisons; the absence of an objective measure of difference; insufficient understanding of the relationship between difference and difficulty. It might be felt that each of these problems is in fact a partial reflection of the fact that CA takes account only of the learner's tendency to transfer L_1 habits into the L_2. There is some truth in this. When we speak about uncertainty in respect of the relevant parameters for description, we are concerned with identifying the parameters which will have significance for the learner. When we say it is important to capture the sytematicity of L_2 relationships, it is partly because we know that the learner will recognise at least some of these relationships himself. When we point to differences in the complexity of comparable structures, we have to admit that this can be viewed independently of transfer. It could be argued, therefore, that these are not in fact problems for CA, which is concerned only with transfer. Contrastive analysts may continue to work as they have, comparing elements from two languages and, using their intuitions and

prior knowledge, making observations on likely transfer effects. But the outcome of this kind of work will always be less than what Lado and others promised. Their promises were based on a very limited, behaviourist account of language learning. Now that language learning is seen to be more complex, to involve more factors than was generally believed then, perhaps the most useful contribution of contrastive analysis will be towards the development of an improved theory of second language learning. I shall mention this again in my concluding remarks.

As I said at the beginning, error analysis is concerned to identify, describe, and explain learners' errors.[6] I shall not discuss well known problems in identifying errors, where the most obvious difficulty is to decide just what the learner intended to say. Nor shall I dwell on the distinction, which Corder regards as important, between errors and slips or lapses. I have argued elsewhere (Hughes 1979) against the use of a competence/performance distinction in the description of learners' language. Suffice it to say here that this distinction can only be useful when there is very little variability in performance, and that this is decidedly not the case with most learners.

The first real difficulty in carrying out EA is in describing errors. What I shall do is take just one error and attempt to show that a number of descriptions of it are possible and that to decide which is appropriate is not at all straightforward. A learner of English says "He catch the train every day." Let us assume that what he intended was "He catches the train every day." We note that the marker of third person present tense, in this case /iz/, is absent. For some purposes (e.g. morpheme acquisition studies), where our only interest is in whether an element is present or not, this observation may be sufficient. But where we wish to determine the extent and nature of the learner's control of the L_2, we need to do more. It is generally regarded desirable to assign the error to a linguistic level. In the present case there are three possibilities: We can say that the error is syntactic, because there is a lack of concord between subject and verb; we can say that it is morphological because the wrong form of catch has been selected; or we can say that it is phonological, the correct morpheme having been chosen but not realised because of some phonological constraint. One response to this situation is to speak of one error occurring at three linguistic levels. This is not a satisfactory solution. We want to reflect in our description the nature of the error made by

the learner. When we assign an error to one linguistic level rather than another, the implication is that this error is in fact different from one having just the same form but assignable to another level. If, for example, we were to describe the 'catch' error as phonological, we would regard it as a different error from another case of 'catch' for 'catches' which we described as a grammatical error. The error - and the processes by which the error came to be made - would be different. The mistake of assigning one error to more than one level is that of providing a purely linguistic description when our real interest is in psychological processes.

How do we decide at what level to describe an error? We may note that the verb catch ends with a sibilant; it is possible that this has contributed to the error. If we discover that the learner consistently fails to mark 3rd person singular in verbs that end with a sibilant (like pass, fudge, flash etc) but does mark it consistently in other verbs, we are led to the conclusion that the error is phonological. The particular phonological environment determines whether third person s is present or not. If we discovered, too, that amongst nouns, only those ending in sibilants were not marked for plural (which have the same allomorphs as 3rd person s), then we would have further support for our conclusion. Of course, the example I have given is extremely simple. Real errors do not pattern themselves so neatly, learners' performance being so variable. Yet even here, to assign an error to a linguistic level with confidence requires a great deal of data, which we could expect to obtain only through careful elicitation. It is most unlikely that we could come to such a decision with any certainty on the basis of, say, a single composition.

We need a great deal of data too (as well as some lintuistic sophistication) to determine, and so describe, the regularities in the learner's version of the I_2. If in our example we had found that third person s was never marked, and that plural always was, we would have said that the error was grammatical. But our description of this grammatical error would differ according to the place that it (and other 3rd person s errors) took in the learner's total performance. If, for example, we discovered that the learner did not mark past tense, the 3rd person s omissions would assume a different significance than if past tense were consistently marked. Our description in the first case would make clear that there were no finite verb markings; in the second case, it would only state that third person singular was unmarked. If we are to write accurate and useful descriptions of the learner's language, we must always look at individual errors in terms of the overall pattern of errors. We

must, too, as our examples have indicated, look at correct responses just as much as at errors.

I turn now to the explanation of errors. Unlike CA, EA is not restricted to the L_1 in its search for the source of learners' errors; also recognised as possible sources of error are the learner's strategies and what we spoke of in connection with CA as 'presentation'. There has been a tendency in EA, I think, to ascribe errors to sources rather too readily. Probably everyone would agree that in the case of the Frenchman who said "I wait the bus since twenty minutes", the errors he makes are attributable to the influence of French. To take another example, when a Hokkien speaker who is asked to choose a book says "red book", we will again immediately think of interference, because the equivalent in Hokkien of the red book is /aŋ tɛ̃ ɛ̃/, literally red book. But when I asked the Spanish speaker mentioned earlier which of a number of books she wanted, she too replied "red book". The equivalent in Spanish of what she should have said ("the red book") is el libro rojo, the definite article (el) being used as in English. Contrastive analysis would not have predicted this error, and in her case we cannot speak of interference. Rather, we will see this error as coming about through some strategy on the part of the learner which results in her creating, at least for a period, a version of the L_2 simpler in certain ways than the original. Returning to the Hokkien speaker, we may wonder whether we were right to attribute his error to interference. Should we have regarded it as the outcome of a learner strategy? It seems to me that it is a mistake to ask the question. No doubt the influence of the first language and the tendency to simplify both contributed to the production of the error. It is quite likely that Hokkien speakers will make more errors of this kind than Spanish speakers; and this difference in frequency may be attributed to the influence of the L_1. We may wish to measure the relative strength of interference and other factors by comparing the performance of groups of learners having different language backgrounds with respect to particular features (e.g. this use of the definite article in English); but we will not feel obliged to assign a single cause to every error.

Let me emphasise this point with a similar example closer to the experience of many of this audience: the omission of third person s by Afrikaans-speaking learners of English. Doubtless the fact that there is no such marking for person in Afrikaans will dispose the learner to omit third person s in English. But since learners of every language

background (and English children) make just the same mistake, we should be warned against thinking that interference is the only factor involved. The learner's tendency to simplify the L_2 is at work here too.

The simplification I have spoken of so far has concerned the omission of an L_2 element. As I indicated when talking about CA, simplification may take another form. By analogy with:-

	small	- smaller
	fast	- faster
he may say	interesting	- interestinger

The learner has overgeneralised an L_2 pattern. But if the learner is a German speaker we can see too the effect of the L_1. In German the equivalents to the English are:-

	klein	- kleiner
	schnell	- schneller
and	interessent	- interessanter[7]

The partial similarity between English and German contributes to the error. Again we cannot separate interference from learners' strategies in the explanation of an error.

I want to show now that the tendency to simplify may interact not only with the tendency to transfer structures of the L_1 (as we have just seen) but also with features of presentation. Selinker (1972) tells us that Serbo-Croatian speaking learners of English often make the mistake of saying "he" when referring to a female. English children are known to do the same thing. We can see here another example of simplification, the distinction between he and she being lost. But Selinker explains this quite differently. It comes about, he says, because 'textbooks and teachers ... almost always present drills with he and never with she". If this is so, and it affects the learner's performance in English, then we have to acknowledge that the tendency to simplify and particularities of presentation can combine as factors in the production of error.

Without the need for detailed exemplification, we can see too, I think, that features of presentation and the tendency to transfer L_1 structures may combine in a similar fashion. It is entirely conceivable, for instance, that the use of translation in teaching will increase negative (and, for that matter, positive) transfer.

What all this means is that we cannot blithely assign every error to what we think is the most likely source. This is naive - but not at all uncommon. It is only the fact that, unlike CA, EA does

not make testable predictions that has hidden the emptiness of many claims as to the frequency of errors attributable to various sources.

I began by wondering whether EA would lose its popularity, as CA has done. The answer, I think, is that people will always continue to look at errors as a guide to the extent of learners' control of the language, and so of what still remains for them to master. They will generally content themselves with superficial descriptions and ad hoc explanations. But for the more ambitious error analyst, who hopes to throw light on the processes by which languages are learned, this is quite unsatisfactory. If this enterprise is to remain popular, it must be successful; and to be successful it must become more sophisticated. Inadequacies in both description and explanation arise principally, I think, from unjustified and over-simple assumptions about the nature of the learning processes which are being investigated. The factors involved in language learning are so many and so complex that what we can learn from the study of corpora of learners' language (however carefully elicited) in isolation is decidedly limited. What we need in addition, I believe, are longitudinal studies and detailed studies of ongoing learning. With regard to simplification, we need to find out not only what form it takes, but also, when it occurs, with which learners and under what conditions. With regard to interference, we need to find out not only what features of the L_1 are transferred, but also, when, by whom and under what conditions. This could be the basis of a new contrastive analysis. In addition, we need to find out how all these factors interact. These are not easy tasks; considerable time and effort will be needed, but it is only in this way, I feel, that we will make real progress towards our goal of understanding fully the processes of second language learning.

To my mind, language teaching is no more than the provision of the conditions for language learning. Our ideal should be to provide each learner with the right conditions at the right time. We can only do this when we have much better understanding than we do now of how languages are learned. We are most likely to achieve this, I believe, through the kind of study that I have advocated here.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Paul Fletcher, Peter Trudgill, and particularly Ron Brasington, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 Throughout this paper I shall make the simplifying assumption that the learner knows only one language and is learning only one language.

3 As a guide to reading in the field of EA, see Corder (1978); for an up-to-date account of CA, see James (forthcoming).

4 For simplicity, from now on I shall treat all learners' performance in the L_2 as spoken.

5 cf intrinsic difficulty of certain sounds e.g. uvular trill.

6 For a straightforward guide to the practice of EA, see Corder (1974).

7 Note that a German speaker, having mastered forms like <u>most interesting</u>, may hypercorrect and begin to say "more small" etc.

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